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ABSTRACT

Prior research has indicated that a person attempts to conform to standards of correctness when objectively self-aware (OSA), suggesting than an OSA person will feel less control than a subjectively self-aware (SSA) person because the standards of correctness restrict the number of preferred outcomes that the causal agent self can produce. The effect of relatively high strictness on standards of correctness was investigated using a fictitious perceptual test purportedly measuring an aspect of intelligence. Subjects were 57 male college undergraduates, who completed a perceptual test while either seated facing the reflective side of a mirror (OSA conditions) or the non-reflective side of the mirror (SSA conditions). With lenient standards, the exposure (OSA) or non-exposure (SSA) to a mirror was then crossed with strict versus lenient standards. Results indicated that subjects in the exposure/strict standard condition perceived less control than subjects in any other condition. (Author)

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OBJECTIVE SELF AWARENESS, STRICTNESS OF STANDARDS OF CORRECTNESS, AND PERCEIVED CONTROL[1]

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Running Head: Objective Self-Awareness and Perceived Control

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[1]Portions of this paper were presented at the 1978 APA.

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Research investigating the effects of control on organisms has generally shown that the perception of control benefits the organism. In a recent study by Rodin and Langer (1977), elderly nursing home residents, tested as part of a program designed to increase perceptions of control over day-to-day events, were re-evaluated eighteen months later. Nurses' ratings, health, and mortality measures indicated that the program and/or the processes it set in motion had produced beneficial effects. Residents enrolled in the program were more actively interested, more sociable, self initiating, and vigorous than residents not enrolled in the program. This suggests that the decline in health, alertness, and activity that generally occurs in the aged in nursing home settings can be slowed or reversed by increasing residents perceived control. In other settings, studies by Lefcourt (1973), Seligman (1975), Zimbardo and Ruch (1975), and Langer and Rodin (1976) also suggest that the effects of perceived control are beneficial. These findings led us to become interested in investigating factors which influence perceptions of control.

Wortman (1975) conducted a study investigating some determinants of perceived control. In this study, subjects were shown two consumer items and were told that they would win one of the items by a chance drawing. Two marbles of different colors were placed in a can and mixed up. One-third of the subjects were told that the experimenter would draw a marble to determine their prize. Subjects had been informed beforehand which marble stood for which prize. Another third of the subjects were again told beforehand which marble stood for which prize, but were told to draw the marble themselves in order to determine their prize. The last

third of the subjects were told to select a marble to determine their prize, but were not told which marble stood for which prize until after they had picked their marble. The results of this study indicated subjects' levels of perceived control was highest when they a) caused an outcome to occur (i.e., selected the marble themselves), and b) had foreknowledge of what the outcome represented (i.e., understood beforehand which marble stood for which prize).

Wortman's (1975) study suggests that one can define perceived control as the extent to which the causal agent self can determine its' own outcomes. Lack of control would occur to the extent that the causal agent self encountered any force which restricted the number of preferred outcomes that it could produce. By preferred outcomes we mean goals that a person perceives as being desirable. Research which reduces perceived control by restricting an organism's preferred outcomes (i.e., avoidance of shock) through the use of external constraints (e.g., Seligman and Maier, 1967) exemplifies this definition. In the Seligman and Maier (1967) study, the harness that constrained the animals movement served as the external force which restricted the organism's preferred outcome of avoidance of shock. The present study examines the effect of internal as opposed to external constraints on perceived control.

Duval and Wicklund (1972) predict and find that a person attempts to conform to standards of correctness under conditions of objective self-awareness (OSA). This suggests that OSA persons will feel less control than subjectively self-aware (SSA) persons because their standards of correctness restrict the number of preferred outcomes that their causal

agent self can produce. In other words, the number of behaviors that are congruent with a standard of correctness are less than the number of behaviors that could be exhibited in the absence of a standard of correctness. Thus, an OSA person should perceive less control than a SSA person because a force (i.e., the standard of correctness) has restricted the number of preferred outcomes that the OSA causal agent self can produce. Duval and Ritz (1972) obtained results consistent with this reasoning. Subjects in OSA conditions perceived less control than subjects in SSA conditions.

Words such as criterion, gauge, and yardstick are synonymous with the word standard. The element which each of these concepts shares is that they are means by which a thing is measured. Within OSA theory, standards of correctness serve as the criterion, gauge, and yardstick by which the appropriateness of the real self is measured. As with criterions, gauges, and yardsticks, we posit that standards of correctness can be accurate (i.e., strict) or less accurate (i.e., lenient). We suggest that the effect obtained by Duval and Ritz (1972) occurs only when the strictness of the standard of correctness, defined as the precision with which any deviation from the standard will be detected, is relatively high. With less strict or lenient standards, the causal agent self's behavior can deviate from the standards of correctness with relative impunity. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis. OSA will reduce perceived control only under conditions of strict standards of correctness.

To test this hypothesis, a fictitious perceptual test purportedly measuring an aspect of intelligence served as the standard of correctness.

The strictness of the standard of correctness was varied by presenting the test as either a precise measure (i.e., strict standard) or as an imprecise measure (i.e., lenient standard) of the aspect of the intellectual dimension. In addition, subjects were either exposed to the reflective side of a mirror (OSA conditions), or the non-reflective side of a mirror (SSA conditions). We predicted a substantial decrease in perceived control only when OSA was combined with the strict standard of correctness.

Method

Subjects: Fifty-seven male students in introductory psychology at USC volunteered for this experiment as a regular part of their course requirements. The experimenter met individually with each subject.

Procedure: Subjects were ushered into an experimental cubicle and seated at a table. A large mirror (1 m. X 75 m.) rested on this table. To prevent the subject from avoiding the mirror by shifting his chair, a stack of chairs had been placed to his right. A GSR machine had been placed on the table to the subject's left with the clearly visible message "Please do not move this equipment" taped to it. Other equipment had been stored behind the subject. The experimenter seated himself to the subject's left and began the study.

The experimenter first justified the presence of the extraneous equipment to the subjects. Subjects were told that a problem had arisen within the psychology department due to the large quantity of research that was being conducted. The problem was a room shortage. The experimenter explained how researchers were forced to share rooms. Subjects were then told that this was a problem because the other equipment that had been stored in the room could potentially affect the study. The experimenter

said that the only equipment needed for his study was a chair and a table since all the subjects would be doing during the study was filling out a questionnaire and taking a perceptual test. The experimenter told the subjects that he personally wished that none of the equipment was there (pointing to the equipment around the room, including the mirror), but that he understood that it was a "hassle" to continually be transferring equipment from one room to another. The experimenter told the subjects that the problem had been resolved by simply asking subjects whether they thought the stored equipment would affect them in any way. All subjects responded "no," and the study continued.

Mirror - No Mirror Manipulation: Subjects had either been seated facing the reflective side of a mirror, the OSA conditions, or the non-reflective side of a mirror, the SSA conditions. The study had been entitled "Gerontology Study." Subjects were told that the study dealt with an aspect of intelligence identified by a famous psychometrician. Subjects were informed that the experimenter was specifically interested in the subjects' ability to perceive convergent figural relationships. Subjects were led to believe that during the study they would take a test which measured their ability in this area of intelligence. The experimenter expressed the hope that with the scores he was obtaining from a sample of college age students, including the subject's, and scores they were getting from older adults at the Gerontology Center, that they would be able to graphically plot how ability in this area varied as a function of age. The experimenter concluded this part of the instructions by saying, "So essentially this is a gerontological study dealing with aging and the perceptual process."

Strictness of Standards Manipulation. After hearing these instructions the strictness of standards manipulation was introduced. The experimenter first placed a sealed test entitled Convergent Figural Relationships Test next to the subjects. The experimenter informed the subjects that this was the test that they would be taking. Subjects were told that this test was used by the vast majority of psychologists who conducted research in the area "as the means by which to measure a person's ability in this area." In the strict standard conditions, subjects were told that the test had been used in hundreds of previous studies and had proven to provide "a very precise and accurate measure of a person's ability in this area." In the lenient standard conditions, subjects were told that the test had been used in hundreds of previous studies and had proven to provide a "fairly reliable, but rough approximate measure of a person's ability in this area."

Following the strictness of standards manipulation, subjects were told that there was some business that had to be taken care of before the study could begin. The experimenter explained that the psychology department had asked him to have all subjects participating in the study fill out a questionnaire. The experimenter told the subjects that this questionnaire was originally meant to have been included in the battery of questionnaires that subjects filled out at the biginning of the semester in their introductory psychology class. The experimenter said that the reason why it hadn't been included was because the professor who had been working on it hadn't completed it on time. In addition, the instructors in the introductory courses didn't want to take yp any more class time having students fill out questionnaires. The experimenter continued by

explaining that since all introductory students had to participate in experiments anyway, the psychology department had simply decided to include the questionnaire in a few of the shorter study sessions, such as the one they were participating in. The experimenter stated that the subjects would be receiving one hour of credit for their twenty minutes of participation. The questionnaire was then handed to the subjects and they were asked whether they had filled it out before. All subjects responded "no." The experimenter concluded the justification of the questionnaire by telling the subjects that if they were asked to fill the questionnaire out again in another study to simply tell the researcher they had already completed it in this study and they would by excused from filling it out again. At this point the subjects were asked to answer the forty-nine items in the questionnaire.

Four items in the questionnaire had been designed to measure the subject's degree of perceived control. These four items and their respective anchor points were: 1) "I feel that I exercise choice without coercion", 2) "I feel that I can implement my personal life plans successfully", 3) "I feel that human behavior is determined by external forces", and 4) "I feel that I have control over my own destiny." Each item was anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree. These four items were imbedded within forty-five other items dealing with contempory social issues.

Subjects were told that following the completion of the questionnaire they would be taking the Convergent Figural Relationships Test. This sealed test still lay next to them. Subjects were told that the test was a timed test and that they were not to open it until after the experimenter had returned and given them further instructions. The experimenter concluded

by asking the subjects whether they had any questions. He then said that he would be back shortly. The experimenter was not present during the time that the subjects completed the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Subjects' responses to the four control questions were highly correlated and thus summed for purposes of analysis. The results of this study are presented in Table 1. An analysis of this data revealed a significant strictness of standards by mirror interaction ($F(1,51) = 8.58$, $p < .05$). An internal analysis using the Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that, as predicted, perceived control in the mirror-strict conditions was less than perceived control in any other conditions ($p < .05$).

In the present study, a decrease in perceived control occurred when OSA was combined with strict standards of correctness. These results support the argument that an OSA person with strict standards of correctness perceives less control than an OSA person with lenient standards or a SSA person because a force (i.e., the strict standard) has restricted the number of preferred outcomes that the causal agent self can produce. These results re-emphasize the point that the loss of perceived control can result from internal (Duval and Ritz, 1972) as well as external constraints. This study also extends the results of Duval & Ritz (1972) in several important ways.

First, it clarifies the relationship between OSA and perceived control. Although Duval and Ritz (1972) found that OSA subjects perceived less control than SSA subjects, the present study indicates that this is the case only when the OSA person's standards of correctness are strict. Under conditions of lenient standards, increased OSA does not decrease subjects'

perceived control. Thus, the relationship between OSA and perceived control appears to be mediated by the strictness of the standards of correctness brought into play by increasing OSA.

Second, the measure of perceived control used by Duval and Ritz (1972) was designed to tap subjects' feelings of control concerning a specific and immediate situation. The measures of perceived control used in the present study (i.e., control over destiny, ability to implement personal life plans, and the extent to which life is perceived as being influenced by internal vs. external factors) were designed to tap subjects' general feelings of control over themselves and the world. The fact that the present experimental manipulation affected subjects' general feelings of control suggests that the impact of OSA combined with strict standards on perceived control is not limited to the immediate situation, but may generalize to any dimension where degree of control is a relevant question.

There are several other implications of the present findings. Persons who are both chronically OSA and who possess strict standards of correctness may come to perceive the world as uncontrollable. That the elderly tend to be more OSA than younger adults (Siegel & Duval, note 1) suggests that the former group is potentially more likely to perceive the world as uncontrollable. In relation to Rodin and Langer (1977), the positive impact of having the elderly residents engage in increased day-to-day activities, such as watering plants, may have occurred, in part, because increased activity typically directs attention away from the self and decreases OSA. Thus, the residents may have perceived greater control because the intervention program decreased their levels of OSA.

A second implication concerns depression. The perception of uncon-

trollability appears to be a major characteristic of the depressive syndrome (Abramson & Sackeim, 1977; Seligman, 1975). Since the present study suggests that the combination of OSA and strict standards of correctness reduces perceived control, OSA combined with strict standards may represent one factor which could lead to, or, intensify depression.

In general then, it may be that any type of intervention program designed to decrease OSA and/or to reduce the strictness of standards of correctness could possibly yield positive results with regard to increasing the overall psychological well-being of those individuals who are chronically high in OSA.

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Table 1

Mean Perceived Control

Type of Standard	Mirror	No Mirror
Strict	33.08 (12)	22.08 (13)
Lenient	22.87 (15)	23.80 (15)

Note: As mean scores increase, perceived control decreases.